

September 2020

State Director's Angle: Rising to the Challenge

Helping SC families thrive amidst a pandemic



By State Director Michael Leach

As a father, a longtime child welfare and mental health professional, and as director of the S.C. Department of Social Services, I empathize with those struggling due to the disruptions this pandemic has caused in nearly every aspect of our daily lives. With the world changing around us, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. While we know more about COVID-19 than we did in March, there is still a lot of uncertainty and none of us is able to accurately predict what will happen weeks or even months from now.

One thing we do know is that families need support more than ever. The virus has put many families in survival mode. Many parents have lost essential parts of their networks, including schools and child care programs, which support children's learning, relationships and routines. Social distancing practices have limited core relationships with family, friends, and civic and faith organizations essential for well-being.

At a time like this, families must be our highest priority. While all families are affected by the pandemic, families in poverty and families in marginalized populations are especially vulnerable and at a much higher risk of being left behind. Significant gaps in access and in available resources across the state also means that virtual education isn't necessarily an equal learning platform for all students. We cannot give up on these families or relax our efforts in doing everything we can to help.

Now is the time for bold thinking...time to rise to the **CHALLENGE** before us and create real **CHANGE** for **South Carolina families!** The future of our state depends on strong and stable families and SCDSS remains steadfast in joining with our dedicated partners to accomplish our critical mission.

Read Director Leach's full commentary recently published in [The Post and Courier](#).



Celebrating Kinship Caregivers

Relatives sacrificing to care for the children they love



[Governor Henry McMaster proclaimed September as Kinship Care Month in South Carolina](#) and all month long, SCDSS and partners throughout the state have celebrated all the incredible ways grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives devote their lives to caring for the children they love. Kinship Care Month helps to increase awareness and understanding of the positive environment that kinship families offer many children in the Palmetto State.

Kinship care refers to a temporary or permanent arrangement in which a relative or non-related adult, also known as fictive kin, has assumed full-time care of a child whose parents are unable to do so. According to the latest Kids Count data, about six percent of all children in our state live with a relative with no parent present. And currently, about 12 percent of children in foster care are placed with kinship caregivers.

“Relationships with family and fictive kin caregivers are crucial for children,” said DSS State Director Michael Leach. “It is our responsibility to promote and preserve kinship, sibling, and other familial connections for children helping them retain their cultural heritage, family, and community ties while preserving their safety and protecting them from abuse and neglect. Not just for the month of September, but year-round and whenever possible, DSS Child Welfare professionals seek to place children who have to enter foster care in a kinship care arrangement first.”



SCDSS State Director Michael Leach recognizes SC kinship caregivers for the incredible role they play in the lives of the children and youth they love and care for.

Interested in being a kinship caregiver?
Click [here](#) to learn more.

SCDSS helps locate over 3,000 SC students who lost contact with schools during the pandemic

After schools were ordered to close in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of students lost contact with their teachers for the remainder of the school year.



In June, the ReOpenSC Senate Select Committee recommended DSS assist the State Department of Education (SDE) with locating students across South Carolina who were unengaged with schools during the period of school closure due to COVID-19. Contact visits conducted by local county-based teams made up of DSS professionals and local law enforcement officials, located more than 3,000 students. During these visits, the most common reasons parents and guardians identified for losing contact with schools included: lack of a computer or internet access, challenges with completing classwork, lack of transportation to pick up or drop off assignments and difficulty balancing working from home with helping their children learn.

DSS State Director Michael Leach said, “While all families are impacted by the pandemic, and the obstacles it brings, families in poverty and families who are in marginalized populations are especially vulnerable and

are at much higher risk to be left behind during this time." He added, "I want to take this opportunity to publicly thank the SC Sheriffs' Association for mobilizing law enforcement to help with contacting these children. We are very grateful for their partnership. I also want to take this opportunity to publicly thank and recognize DSS professionals across the agency for immediately getting involved and assisting with this work."

Read [here](#) for more information about student location efforts.



ADVISORY for PARENTS and CAREGIVERS of children learning at home...

The SC Department of Social Services must grant approval for temporary child care operations designed to support children during school-time care, e-learning care, virtual learning, and/or extended school time care due to schools not providing in-classroom instruction. [Learn more or apply for a temporary certificate to operate a school-age child care facility during the COVID-19 Pandemic.](#)



SC selected for new, national program to redesign Child Welfare System

South Carolina is one of four jurisdictions nationwide chosen to participate in the first tier of a cutting-edge national program that aims to move child welfare systems from traditional, reactive child protection systems to advanced systems designed to support holistic child and family well-being while preventing child maltreatment and unnecessary family separation.

This first-of-its-kind partnership, *Thriving Families, Safer Children: A National Commitment to Well-Being*, is a program developed by the U.S. Children's Bureau, Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Prevent Child Abuse America. Tenets of the new concept will seek involvement from stakeholders to work across the public, private and philanthropic sectors to help South Carolina create more just and equitable systems to break harmful multi-generational cycles of trauma and poverty to benefit all children and families.

SCDSS Adult Advocacy Division Director to lead state's Adult Protection Coordinating Council.

Kelly Cordell, SCDSS Director of Adult Advocacy has been named chair of the SC Adult Protection Coordinating Council. The



Did you know...

South Carolina has 900,000 residents age 65 and older, which is

Council was created by the South Carolina General Assembly to foster coordination and cooperation among multiple entities involved in the adult protection system. The twenty-two member council is composed of twenty public and private organizations and two gubernatorial appointees.

Visit our
website
to Learn
more
about Adult
Protective
Services

18% of the state's entire
population.
Almost 75,000
of these senior adults
live in poverty.

Child Support Services

Supporting families during the pandemic

By Tim Mose, Director
SCDSS Child Support Services Division

Despite the challenges inherent to the implementation of most any new computer system, child support collections have remained strong. Even given the pandemic, collections during state fiscal year 2020 were \$341,594,909, a 14% increase over the previous year.

Though most of the staff are working away from the office, the Child Support Services Division (CSSD) is still offering all services to its customers. The closure of the family courts, some of whom are only just beginning to allow hearings again, has hampered delivery in terms of support order establishment, reviews of existing orders, and initially assisting the county offices with the scheduling of genetic testing. However, throughout the pandemic, CSSD has continued to accept applications from individuals and qualifying agencies, locating individuals when needed for future hearings, and taking all major enforcement actions to enforce orders – generally, wage garnishment and tax offset.

Early in calendar year 2021, CSSD will offer a new parent portal that will provide parents online access to their essential case information. Constituents will be able to update their addresses and employment information, find out when hearings are scheduled, see what enforcement measures are in place for their cases and make electronic inquiries.



Drive-thru Job Fairs Helping Families

The coronavirus pandemic has affected almost every aspect of life and the way job fairs are conducted is no exception. DSS recently participated in three drive-thru job fairs in recent months to assist those who are suddenly jobless with regaining employment as quickly as possible. Pictured here are cars lined up for a job fair event in Anderson, SC. This is just one way DSS serves South Carolinians by helping individuals achieve economic stability.

Local nonprofit donates school supplies to children in foster care



Thanks to the generosity of the non-profit Katrina's Kids, 500 children in foster care will begin the new school year with a new book bag, a bag of school supplies, masks and an individual bottle of hand sanitizer. Many thanks to DSS State Office professionals for stuffing, organizing, coordinating and delivering these bags to county offices. DSS appreciates Katrina's Kids for always donating to help our children and families!



Learn more about the work of [Katrina's Kids](#).



Foster Parent Association Recognizes DSS Social Worker of the Month

The South Carolina Foster Parent Association recognized Sonja Smith, with the Pee Dee Foster Family and Licensing Support Unit at SCDSS, as their September Social Worker of the Month. One foster parent had this to say: "Sonja is upbeat, professional, and caring. She responds to texts, calls, and emails in a timely manner. Sonja is a wonderful support to us as foster parents. I appreciate her so much!" ***Congratulations,***

Sonja, for outstanding service to children and families!



Report abuse and neglect of children and vulnerable adults.

DSS
SOUTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT of SOCIAL SERVICES

1-888-CARE4US

**** STAY SAFE ****

SC Department of Social Services
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Columbia, SC 29202-1520



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